

Early Television in Lancaster

By I. Don Cairns(SK)

Television was in its' infancy in the early years of 1940 but word was getting around that some TV stations were producing worthwhile programs of pretty good quality. WPTZ in Philadelphia was one of those stations, but even if their signals would be strong enough to reach to Lancaster we could not receive them. These signals are line of sight only and will not bend to follow the curvature of the earth. In addition, the Welsh Mountains stood directly in their path. Antennas would have to be too high. Television in Lancaster seemed years away.

When RCA moved to the Lancaster Area it brought together two groups of people who did not want to wait that long. Many of the engineers moving here with RCA from the metropolitan area knew how it could come sooner. When they started others joined in including local enthusiasts with ham radio experience.

In April of 1945, some were already looking into the needs of the new transmitter that would be needed and others were making tests in the Welsh Mountains to find a suitable location for a tower, but three important letters had to be written. One was to let RCA management know what we wanted to do as an "after hours project". TV station WPTZ in Philadelphia had to be asked for permission to rebroadcast their signal and we had to ask the Federal Communication Commission for a license to transmit a signal. A negative reply from any one of these would scuttle our project. Not only was RCA in favor of seeing our project getting under way, but they helped us to get the other permissions and offered to supply us with some needed materials and help.

Early tests on the mountain showed an increase of signal up to a height of 25 feet so it was promising that with a tower much higher, we could receive a satisfactory signal for our purposes. A tower to get the signal over the Welsh Mountains seemed to be one of our key needs but it was only one of many that made it an interesting television club.

Of the 27 charter members announced in September of 1945 there were those who had knowledge and could work in the many areas needed. There were lectures on many technical as well as non-technical subjects. Two librarians kept these and other related publications available for all. The Synchronizer, a monthly newsletter, kept all informed as to what each member had accomplished on their assigned project that month. This made news and progress available to all. In March of 1947 23 members took the examination for a third class radiotelephone license so as to be allowed to operate our new transmitter.

The names of P.A. Richards stands out as first president of the group and E.E Hoffman as chief engineer.

Only those involved know the headaches encountered in the building, testing and rebuilding before the transmitter was finished. There was also the reporting to the FCC. I remember one test when we took it to the Pagoda on the side of the mountain near Reading and beamed the WPTZ program to the RCA penthouse from there. The same group built the new receiver. When they were ready for a serious test our tower was ready too.

Our Tower committee had found an operator of a sand quarry located in an ideal area of the Welsh Mountains who was also

interested in the progress of television. If we paid our way regarding heat and electricity we could locate our transmitter in his small office building. Our tower could be located nearby. We seemed to be all set for a show. The January of 1948 issue of the Synchronizer told us seven members had their receivers in operation at their homes. Some had purchased a surplus navy radar receiver and made some changes (some of us with help) to receive the 600 megacycle signal. Eight more would be ready at the end of the year.

We had started out as just a Television Club and later we called ourselves the Lancaster Television Association, but when we were incorporated in August of 1945 we chose Conestoga Television Association instead. The former name had already been taken.

On Christmas afternoon of 1947, the Hamilton Watch Company sponsored a TV show and a receiver was set up in the RCA cafeteria and a fairly large group of Hamilton employees came to view it. A new sound system was tested out on that day and it was reported there were no major mishaps.

Other testing took place along the way as when we tested our mountain tower the first time. That was when we sent the Joe Louis-Tami Mauriello fight program into Lancaster. Near the end of 1948, the state of the art had advanced so well that many in Lancaster were now receiving TV signals direct from Philadelphia. Most admitted it was not perfect and many reports compared somewhat with what we were sending into Lancaster a year or so previously. On November 29 of that year the Metropolitan Opera Company brought their first night of Verdi's "Othello" to the TV screens. Many tuned in and gave the same report, sometimes pretty good. It was reported that

15 members of CTA "Thoroughly enjoyed" the opera from a set in the RCA penthouse. The experimental station W3XDA was doing very well.

In March of 1949, WGAL-TV started with Nelson Sears as the program director and Lancaster has had the best of TV since then.

Don Cairns (SK), President CTVA

The progress of the Association was reported in the May 1949 issue of Radio - Electronics.

The Lancaster County Historical Society provided Don Cairns report as compiled by W3FEY.



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